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A COMTEAN CENTENARY¹

ABSTRACT

Comte's appeal in 1822 for a new science of society. *Three objectives: (a) a diagnosis of contemporary European society; (b) elevation of politics to the rank of a science of observation; (c) realization of a physique sociale. Three clues to the failure of Comte's project to initiate a decisive movement in the United States: (a) it was essentially pre-evolutionary; (b) it was excessively abstract rather than human; (c) positivism had connotations for American minds which excluded judicial consideration.*

In May, 1822, one of the scientific journals of Paris published a paper entitled: *Plan des travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société.*² It was from the pen of Auguste Comte, a then unknown young man of twenty-four years. It was addressed in a bold and interesting fashion to the "savants" of Europe. Apparently it did not secure very much attention even from the learned of Paris, then at the height of its scientific prestige. It has received scarcely more notice since, even among the sociologists. It contains, however, the essence of Comte's later sociological propositions. Whatever be our estimate of the actual share of Comte's influence in the subsequent development of sociology, no evidence is in sight which threatens his title to priority as prospector of the field which sociologists have occupied. In this prospectus Comte does not suggest the term *La Sociologie*. That did not get into print, so far as we know, until the publication of the fourth volume of his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*³ sixteen years later. He definitely outlines a scientific program, which later men developed along lines which he could not have foreseen, but which has adopted the title that he proposed.

A summary of the monograph will show that its author projected in it three very definite things. They may be indicated as follows:

First, Comte attempts to characterize and sum up the existing social situation in European society. He finds in it two definite

¹This memorandum is based on materials collected by Mr. Martin Hayes Bickham.

²This essay was republished in the volume of Comte's early essays entitled *Opuscules de Philosophie Sociale*, Paris, 1883.

³Vol. IV, pp. 200-201.

movements, one of *Disorganization*, motivated by critical or revolutionary doctrine, and heading toward intellectual, moral, and social anarchy; the other of *Reorganization*, under the direction of an emerging "organic doctrine." This "organic doctrine" needs to be guided and constituted on a genuine scientific basis, in order to lead society to the constructive bases of order and progress.

Second, Comte enters into a more detailed analysis of the current social situations in European society, in order to show the real need for a constructive "organic" theory in the practical and theoretical social reorganization of Europe. Comte locates the social force necessary to organize and propagate this "organic" doctrine in the European "savants." He makes a dramatic appeal to them to undertake this great task. He declares that the direct instrument to accomplish this social reorganization is a truly positive science of politics, based upon modern principles of observation and reason. He reduces his ideals to the aphorism: *les savants doivent aujourd'hui élever la politique au rang des sciences d'observation*.¹

Third, Comte outlines a prospectus, as a suggestion to the "savants" of the way this task of raising politics to the rank of a positive science should be carried out. It is in this section of his monograph that Comte introduces the conception of a social science under the aspect of *physique sociale*. He urged that the process of arriving at positive organizations of the facts about the human species must make observation completely predominant over imagination. Historical observation of man and his civilization must be carefully worked out, and the laws of the collective development of the human species must be elucidated along distinctly natural lines. These historical facts and immutable natural laws will provide the bases for the theories of the new social system of Europe.

Comte then reviews the previous attempts to constitute the rational bases for a social science, which he says have all labored under the weight of metaphysical complications that have prevented the attainment of true scientific positivity. Montesquieu,

¹ *Vid.*, *Opuscules*, p. 99.

Condorcet, and Cabanis, working respectively in the fields of political science, history, and physiology, have each dealt with social phenomena, but each failed to introduce into his scientific organization and construction the genuine principles of observation and reason which alone can reduce these complicated phenomena to scientific order of a positive type. This survey of the current scientific movement, Comte continues, reveals a gap in the ranks. There is no science that deals definitely and clearly with these collective phenomena of the human species. At this point Comte introduces his proposal of *physique sociale*, as the positive science calculated to fill this gap in the general scientific treatment of the phenomena of nature. This social physics is to be based solely on observation of these collective phenomena of the human species. It is to be as positive and as constructive as any of the sciences. It will appear in two types of works: first, the general works, dealing with the wide-sweeping course of development of the human mind, from the period when language first came to be utilized, to the current European civilization; second, the particular works, dealing with detailed investigation in several epochs and among different peoples.

The time has probably not quite arrived for even-handed justice to Comte. It will be one of the tasks of future historians of sociology to account for the fact that, in spite of Lester F. Ward's long primacy among American sociologists, and in spite of Ward's avowed discipleship of Comte, the sociological movement in the United States did not show credible signs of ability to sustain its life until it was actuated by influences among which the unprompted observer might easily overlook the Comtean factor.

Two clues to the explanation are familiar today: First, Comte spoke from and for a type of scientific consciousness which ceased to be dominant with his generation. He died two years before the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Prying into human affairs could not fail to be more after the manner of Darwin and less after the manner of Faraday or La Place.

Second, as a matter of fact, American sociology came into existence in response more directly to the appeal of sympathy than to that of science. At the beginning, American sociologists were

more interested in real people and their life-problems, than in academic abstractions. Comte's propositions affected them as more of the head than of the heart. Especially his *summmum bonum*, a "religion of humanity," did not seem to them to ring true. It looked to them more like a synthetic diamond than like a spark of life.

A third clue is less obvious but perhaps more searching, viz: To the serious French positivist the term positivism was the algebraic sign for the same candid attitude toward reality for which others have used the symbol "objectivity." To every one in England, Germany, and America with a reserve of religious or ethical tradition, however, positivism meant at first simply the blatant atheism of the Robespierre cult of "reason," with slightly bettered manners. To this day the scientific substance of positivism has been heavily discounted because of this association of ideas. If Comte had carried none of this handicap he might have been more convincing.

So far as it is visible today, the precise truth is, first, that Comte anticipated by more than a half-century an effective demand for a sociology; second, that when the demand came it was actuated by impulses among which the Comtean tradition was not the most powerful.